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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAKU 001276

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [AJ](#)
SUBJECT: AZERBAIJANI PROTESTANTS SAY RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IS
WORSENING

REF: A. BAKU 01029

[1](#)B. BAKU 00794

Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The Ambassador met with three local Protestant pastors on October 18 to hear their views on religious freedom. The pastors agreed that while religious freedom generally has increased since 1991, conditions have become worse for evangelical Christians in the last several years. The pastors complained the GOAJ selectively makes it difficult for them to register churches or selectively singles them out for harassment, and expressed concern over the case of imprisoned Baptist pastor Zaur Balaev (reftels) and the precedent of a potential GOAJ crackdown on Protestants. The pastors argued that the GOAJ version of religious tolerance and freedom only extends to a circle of officially sanctioned religious communities. The GOAJ's policy toward evangelical groups is at odds with its policy of religious tolerance, and we will seek views from relevant GOAJ officials. We should raise religious freedom in our bilateral democracy dialogue. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) The Ambassador met with three local Protestant pastors on October 18 to hear their views on religious freedom. The pastors were Ivan Zavrichko (Seventh Day Adventist Church), Ilya Zenchenko (Baptist Church), and Rasim Khalilov (Cathedral of Praise Pentecostal Church). Zavrichko said there are 700 Seventh Day Adventist members in Azerbaijan and two of their six churches are registered in the country. Zenchenko stated there are approximately 3,000 Baptists and 20 Baptist churches in Azerbaijan. Khalilov said his church has been in Azerbaijan for at least twelve years and has 1,100 members. The pastors agreed their churches are all growing and include large numbers of Azerbaijanis.

Concern over Imprisoned Pastor

[1](#)3. (C) Zavrichko raised the case of imprisoned Baptist pastor Zaur Balaev, and the broader concern among Protestant churches that this sets a disturbing precedent of a potential GOAJ crackdown on Protestants. (Per reftels, Balaev -- the head of a Baptist community in the remote northwestern village of Aliabad -- was arrested in May on charges of assaulting police and refusing to come to the local police station. Baptists strongly dispute these charges.) Khalilov said Balaev was arrested because he was a Georgian minority and was spreading his faith. Zenchenko noted that repression of Aliabad-based Baptists appeared to pick up steam in March, after Caucasus Muslim Board (CMB) head Sheikh Allahshukur Pashazade and State Committee on Work with Religious

Associations (SCWRA) Hidayat Orujov visited the region and publicly spoke out against the influence of "sects."

Freedom for Protestants Worsening

¶4. (C) The pastors agreed that while religious freedom has increased since 1991, conditions have become worse for evangelical Christians in the last several years. In particular, the pastors complained the GOAJ selectively makes it difficult for them to register churches or selectively singles them out for harassment. The pastors observed that the GOAJ opposes them because they seek to spread Christianity among Azeri Muslims. (Comment: The Azerbaijani law on religion is vague on the permissibility of missionary activity. According to an unofficial Embassy translation of the law, "It is prohibited to propagandize religions with the appliance of religious violence or sowing discord among the people with the aim of changing their religious way of life or forcing to change their confessing religion." It is open to interpretation what constitutes "sowing discord among the people." The law on religious freedom, however, does state, "Everyone shall determine his/her attitude to religion independently and shall have the right to confess any religion individually or together with others, and express or spread his/her belief dealing with his/her attitude to religion.")

¶5. (C) The pastors noted that a previous intervention by a former U.S. Ambassador, making a personal plea to former President Heydar Aliyev for the GOAJ to allow evangelical Christian churches to register, had opened the door to greater religious freedom. In recent years, however, the GOAJ, has adopted a more antagonistic approach toward Christian communities. Zavrichko said since Orujov's

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appointment as the SCWRA head in July 2006, relations between the CMB and SCWRA have become much warmer. Both the CMB and the SCWRA agree on the need to suppress Protestants and missionaries, according to Zavrichko. (COMMENT: A large body of local contacts confirm the warm ties between Orujov and the Sheik, which contacts report has led to a more consistent GOAJ attempt to control Islamic and Christian communities.)

¶6. (C) Zavrichko and the others provided several pieces of evidence of GOAJ bias against Protestants. Khalilov cited a spring SCWRA meeting, chaired by Orujov, that discussed plans for harassing Christian communities in the regions. The meeting was for SCWRA representatives in the regions. (Khalilov and the other pastors claimed knowledge of the meeting because a local Christian representative was mistakenly invited.) The pastors also cited Orujov's suggestion that all Christians communities be put under the leadership of the local Orthodox representative. The pastors claimed that Orujov and other GOAJ officials derogatorily refer to their groups as "sects." The pastors also remarked that Orujov has proudly claimed on television that the SCWRA controls religious communities and has its spies in various groups.

GOAJ Claims of Religious Tolerance are Hypocritical

¶7. (C) Zavrichko said the GOAJ only extends genuine religious freedom to a small circle of officially sanctioned religious communities, specifically Islamic institutions, the Orthodox church, Jews, and Molokans. Cooperation exists among these communities because they are closely linked to and support the GOAJ. Zavrichko noted that the GOAJ's version of religious tolerance is a "theater" with only three actors: CMB chief Pashazade, Orthodox priest Alexander Episkop, and Jewish community head Semyon Ihilov. Zavrichko also remarked that Russian support for the Orthodox church and Israeli support for the Jewish community has influenced

the GOAJ's willingness to work closely with these communities.

18. (C) The pastors asked the Ambassador to facilitate a meeting between them and President Aliyev, claiming that they believed the President was not aware of the difficulties they face. The Pastors expressed concern about an amended law on religion which they claimed is being discussed by some MPs and could restrict religious freedom. (Comment: We periodically hear this concern. We asked the SCWRA about this in the spring, and they said there are no plans for a change to the law.) The Ambassador noted she was willing to raise their interest in a meeting with President Aliyev and suggested that they also raise their concerns with European diplomatic missions.

19. (C) Comment: We have met regularly with this group over the past year and have raised their concerns repeatedly with SCWRA Head Orujov and Deputy Foreign Minister Mamamdguliyev, who is responsible for human rights. The GOAJ has stuck to its position that Pastor Balaev was engaged in illegal activity and appears unwilling to intervene in the case. Balaev is pursuing an appeal and plans to file a case with the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). The GOAJ's pressure on Protestant groups is at odds with its professed policy of tolerance toward religious minorities and stands in marked contrast to its excellent relations with and support for "traditional" minority religious groups in Azerbaijan. The GOAJ is unlikely to change its position without significant pressure. We will seek views from the CMB and SCWRA on the pastors' charges; we also recommend that religious freedom be added to the agenda of our bilateral dialogue on democracy and human rights.
DERSE